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DIRECTORATE OF
INTELLIGENCE

Intelligence Report

*The Illicit Production and Movement of Opiates
in Latin America*

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CIA/BGI GR 71-4
January 1971

WARNING

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Central America and the Caribbean Islands

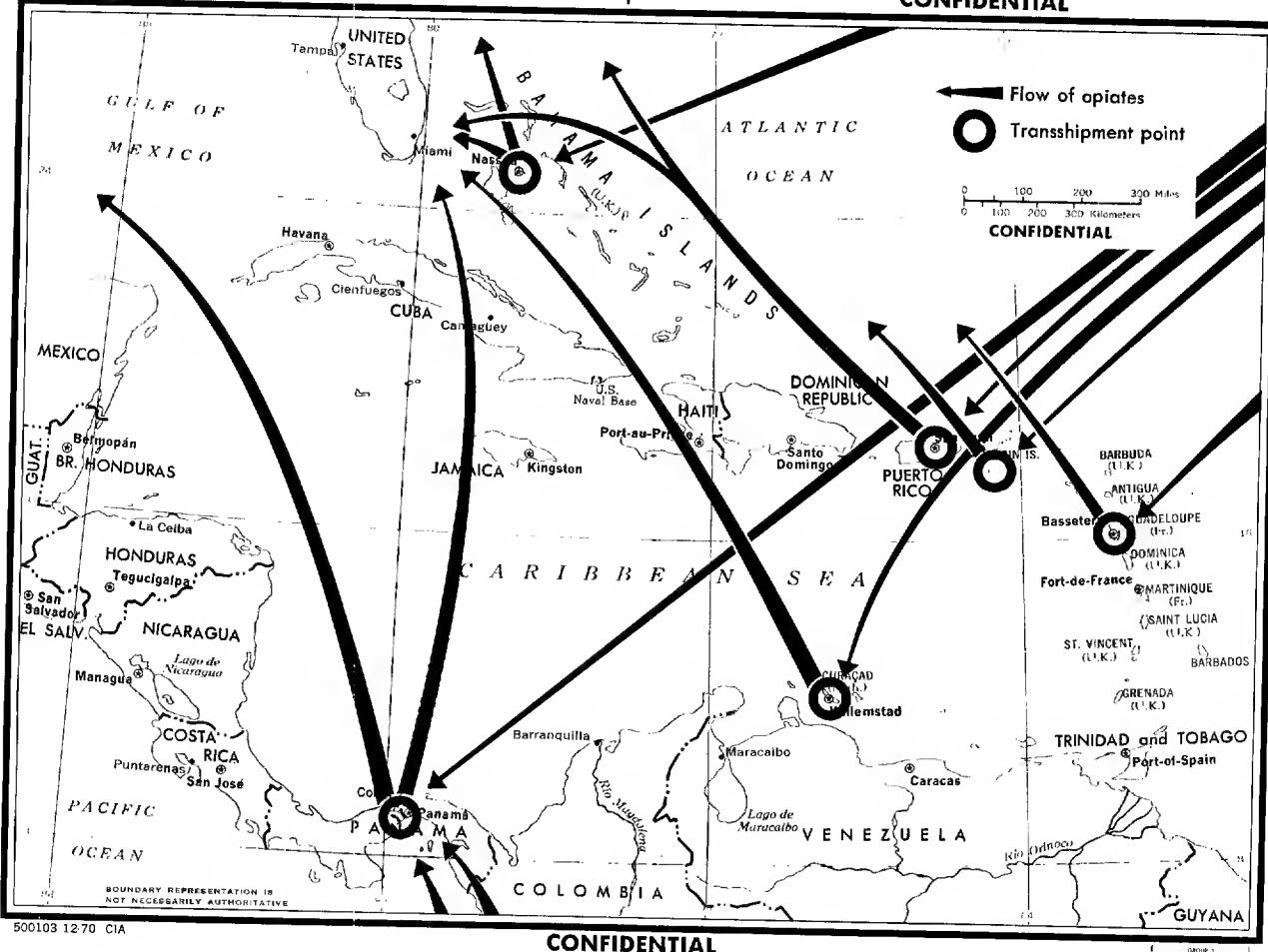
18. Central America and the Caribbean have long been at the center of a vast swirl of contraband activities. During the 17th and early 18th centuries the British, using Jamaica as their main base of operations, carried on a well-planned program of smuggling to weaken ties linking Spain and her New World empire. French and Dutch smugglers were also active throughout the area. Confederate blockade runners during the US Civil War and the rumrunners of a more recent era contributed to the reputation of the Caribbean as a smuggler's paradise. Illicit trade continues to flourish today, and narcotics of all types flow into, within, and out of the region in great volume. Thousands of small craft cruise the Caribbean waters and make monitoring of smuggling, not to mention its prevention, almost impossible. The pattern of movement of opiates into the area from Europe and their subsequent movement to the United States is shown on the map.

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Central America and The Caribbean: Illicit Traffic in Opiates

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19. Panama, strategically located at the focal point of the sea lanes and airways of the Western Hemisphere, is recognized as one of the great contraband centers of the world. It handles large quantities of whiskey, cigarettes, and luxury goods of all sorts in transit to South America, and heroin and cocaine bound for the United States. Over 14,000 ships pass through the canal annually, and a constant stream of planes arrive and depart Tocumen International Airport near Panama City. Much of the heroin probably arrives by air from points far to the

south -- such as Lima and Santiago. Cocaine also is introduced from these places and from Guayaquil and Quito, Ecuador, and from points in Colombia. Ships from Europe and from the Orient also contribute to the supply of narcotics entering Panama.

20. Recently opium poppies have been discovered in Costa Rica. Ornamental varieties of the poppy (Papaver somniferum L.) have been grown there for many years, but opium producing varieties have not been detected heretofore. Now, however, the plants have been discovered in a number of places in the northwestern part of Cartago Province -- in gardens, in a cemetery, and on the slopes of Irazu Volcano. Costa Rican authorities uprooted about 500 of the plants on 10 July 1970. Subsequently more than a thousand additional plants have been found and destroyed.

21. The opium content of these plants is said to be high, but the recently discovered fields are not large enough to have yielded a significant amount of opium. However, a farmer has reported having burned a 30-manzana field (slightly over 50 acres) of the opium poppies (without knowing what they were at the time) in order to plant potatoes less than a year ago.

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22. The Costa Rican Guardia Civil is continuing to search the slopes of Irazu, an 11,260-foot volcano located in the Cordillera Central about 17 miles east of the capital city of San Jose. Additional secluded sites in the Cordillera Central as well as mountainous country elsewhere in Costa Rica may provide suitable sites for clandestine poppy cultivation. Fears have also been expressed that clandestine heroin laboratories may be in operation somewhere in the country but no real evidence of this has been discovered. According to one theory, drug traffickers are moving into Costa Rica because of increased pressure by security forces in other countries.

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25X1C 23. Nicaragua has also been described [REDACTED] as a transit point for heroin shipped north from South America via Panama to the United States. Certainly large amounts of other types of contraband, including small arms from Costa Rica, cross its borders regularly.

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25. Seizures of heroin have been made recently in Puerto Rico and in St. Croix in the US Virgin Islands. The heroin was of European origin and probably on its way to New York. An attempt in 1969 to smuggle heroin into the French island of Guadeloupe on a French ship was foiled, but now the drug flows from Marseille via the island to Miami and New York, possibly by air.

26. Curacao, in the Netherlands Antilles off the coast of Venezuela, is also an active transshipment point for European opiates destined for the United States. [REDACTED] large amounts of heroin have gone from Amsterdam to Curacao and then on to Miami or New York. Numerous steamships and airlines offer regular and frequent services between the island and points in Europe, the United States, Canada, South and Central America, and practically all of the important islands of the Caribbean. As is typical of the principal smuggling centers around the world, the island contains extensive free port facilities and gambling casinos. Nearby Aruba is also involved in various types of smuggling (including cocaine, marijuana, and contraband Colombian coffee), but specific information on traffic in opiates is not available.

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27. Trinidad may act as a transshipment

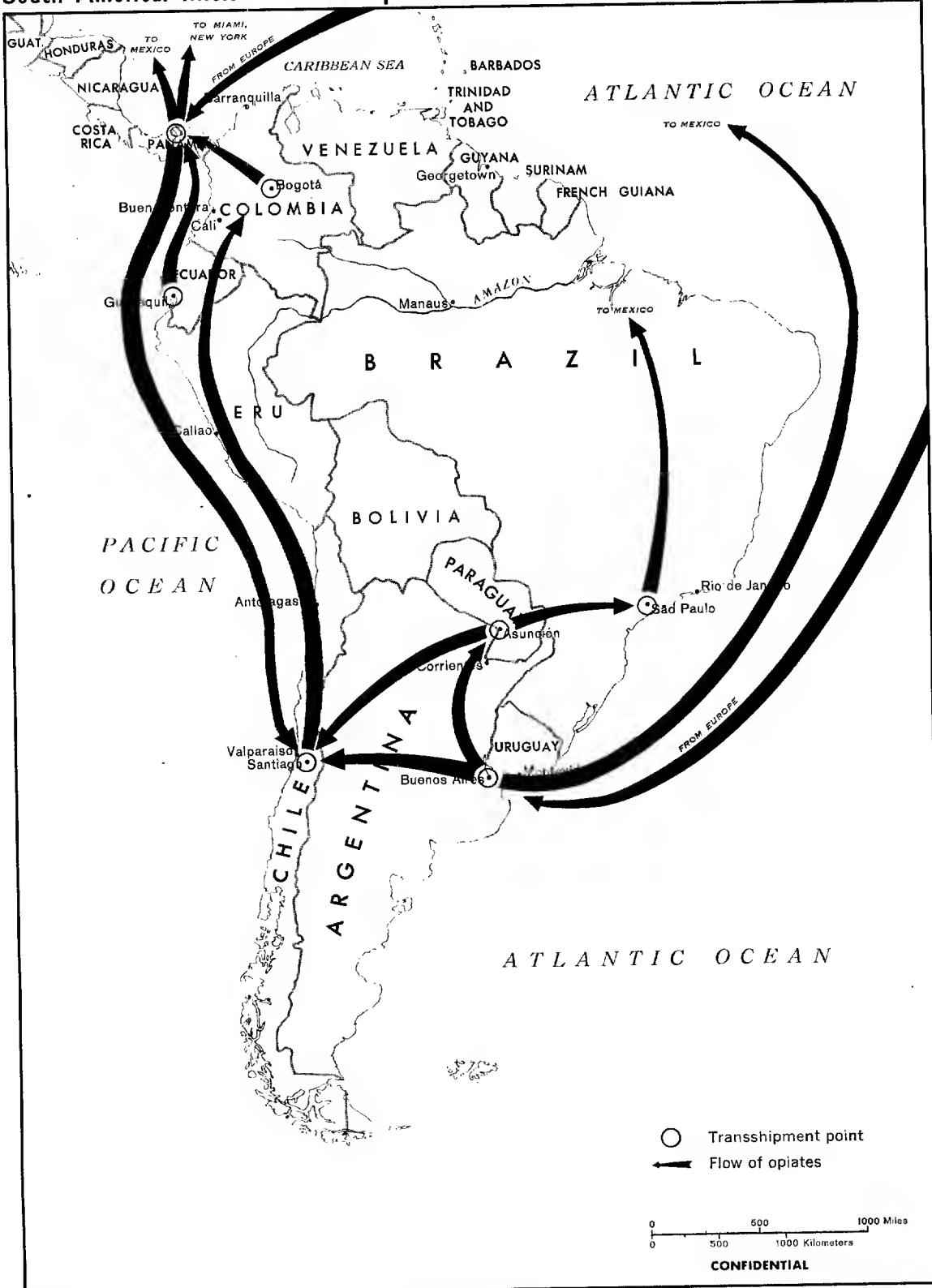
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South America: Illicit Traffic in Opiates

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35. The air routes used for smuggling within South America are devious and continuously changing. Usually, flights up and down the Pacific Coast hug the lowlands to avoid hazardous flying over the rugged Andes Mountains and to increase the chances of finding emergency landing spots in case of mechanical difficulties. A typical flight north from Santiago, Chile, to the United States might include stops at Guayaquil, Ecuador, and Panama. Sometimes flights from the south stop at Cali or Bogota before continuing to Panama or proceeding directly to Miami. In addition to using public airfields, [REDACTED] the smugglers use hundreds of makeshift clandestine landing strips.

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36. Heroin smuggled into Buenos Aires is sometimes shipped up the Rio de la Plata and Rio Parana. Offloaded before it reaches Paraguay (perhaps in the vicinity of Corrientes), it is then flown to clandestine airfields in that country. From Paraguay the drug continues by air to Brazil and then northward to the United States. Heroin smuggled into Paraguay from Argentina may also be flown to Santiago, Chile, and then up the Pacific Coast to Panama and eventually to the United States.

37. As early as 1966, reports indicated the probability of narcotics smuggling by air from France to Argentina, via Spain, and then on to the United States. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] In April 1970, Argentine police arrested members of a gang known as "La Pietra Forte". They were engaged in smuggling European heroin from Buenos Aires to the United States.

38. French-Italian and Latin American gangs are also thought to be smuggling heroin destined for transshipment to the United States into Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. These smuggling rings apparently have connections in New York and Naples, and probably in Buenos Aires and Sao Paulo as well.

39. The heroin traffic in South America is becoming closely linked to the more traditional traffic in cocaine and other well established contraband items such as American cigarettes.

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